

# Taking the lead

How a passion for inclusivity is opening up new opportunities for beaters and pickers-up in the East Midlands. By **Martin Puddifer**.

PHOTOGRAPHY: WALKING GUN PHOTOGRAPHY

If you are a novice beater or picker-up with a gundog struggling to find a shoot that will accept you, or if you are a shoot which wants to give something back to your community but aren't sure how, then draw inspiration from the work currently being done by Emma Stevens of Cunningshot Dog Training or Rich and Henry Jones from the Kedleston Estate Shoot in Derbyshire.

Emma hosted the first of what are sure to become extremely popular training days, designed specifically to introduce dog handlers to beating and picking-up, at the 4,500-acre shoot last season. Emma already knew Rich Jones and his brother Henry through Emma's gamekeeper husband Tom, so Kedleston was the obvious choice for the venue to host a day's training. It is also fitting because

“I want to merge the boundaries between novices and people lucky enough to have been born and raised with country sports.”

Rich and Henry were looking for a way to give back to the sport in an innovative way. High standards mean a great deal to both parties and there is a strong will to break through the glass ceilings which exist within shooting in an attempt to show game shooting in its best light; that is, one that is open to everyone, no matter what your background or level of experience.

The premise is simple and one which any shoot can easily replicate: on the training days themselves, each novice beater and picker-up (and their dog) is given a mentor who has a more in-depth understanding of what's required of their role on a shoot day. The training days, where bags are set at around 70, are designed so that the novices get to experience the real thing without the weight of expectation on their or their dog's shoulders – there's no pressure to pick-up hundreds

of birds and no pressure on the gamekeepers (and therefore the beaters) to get that number over the Guns in the first place.

So where did this journey really begin? I caught up with Emma as last season drew to a close to find out a little more about her, the Cunningshot philosophy and what drove her to set up the training days.

**MP:** *What's your background in gundog training and game shooting?*

**ES:** I didn't come from a shooting background but I did spend my upbringing outdoors. I started out doing agility and obedience work with collies and sheepdogs, and also helped train horses with my dad when I was growing up in Buckinghamshire. I picked up my love for gundogs when I studied veterinary medicine at the University of Nottingham. I played hockey to a high standard before university, but due to injury I could no longer play and I needed something that wasn't veterinary related just to take my mind off studying. I picked up clay shooting and ended up shooting for the university's ladies' team. It let me travel and switch off from my studies but wasn't too intense. Most of the people on the team were from countryside or farming



Emma Stevens, the founder and face of Cunningshot Dog Training.

backgrounds, so I clicked with them and they got me into things like pigeon and game shooting. Gundogs just followed on from that.

I got my first gundog, a springer-labrador cross called Ziggy, when I was in my second year. I made all the mistakes a novice handler can make but learned an awful lot. I travelled around the country, training with different people and had some

great mentors – not necessarily well-known people, just great dogmen. I began working Ziggy on game days. They say it's addictive and it is. From that I went into spaniels, and began exploring novice and puppy tests with my second spaniel, Bailey, just to see if I enjoyed it. It was good fun but working my dog on a shoot was just the best feeling in the world. I just wanted to work ▶

The training days mainly focus on what happens behind the line but standards are also high elsewhere.





The days build up the confidence of both the handlers and their dogs.

my dogs in the field. Our pack grew when my husband started gamekeeping and we now have around 20 dogs at any one time.

**MP:** *What were your first experiences of working your gundogs on shoots like?*

**ES:** I was terrified to start with because though my training knowledge was there, my field knowledge was not. Being a female handler (and a student who couldn't drive) meant it was quite daunting going into a predominantly male-orientated environment. But the men who mentored me acted like father figures. My entry into game shooting was a lot more positive than most women, or novices in general, going into it for the first time. I do a lot of work with

a company called the Ladies Working Dog Group, which has around 4,000 members, and there are so many stories from women saying how unwelcome they have been made to feel or how poorly they've been treated when they've tried to get into a shoot. Hearing that is sad; I've never experienced that, but I know it goes on.

**MP:** *What inspired you to set up your training days?*

**ES:** I want to merge the boundaries between novices and people lucky enough to have been born and raised with country sports at the heart of their upbringing, without rocking the boat or ruining any days. When I train my clients I don't train their dogs to be gundogs, I train them to be ready



Rich Jones had long wanted to give something back to the shooting community.

for the field. It's straightforward to train a dog to do a retrieve; you can add the stop and turn whistles afterwards, but you can't take a fully-trained dog and put it with a complete novice. The handler can, through lack of knowledge, mess up on etiquette or really upset people just purely because they "didn't know". I was lucky. I was taken under people's wings. Lots of people don't have that opportunity and so this was the main drive for these training days.

When I started dog training professionally in 2016, I noticed

a big gap for either novices who had bought a gundog breed but didn't know how or where to get into game shooting or found it unwelcoming – especially women. There also didn't seem to be anything for those who didn't understand how a gundog should work on a shoot day, which is different to trialling. My husband Tom is a gamekeeper, I've got gamekeeper friends and mentors who've helped me, our traditional dogmen who work their dogs six days a week on shoots during the season, so we wanted to create something with their input. ▶



Handlers have mentors helping them to learn by doing.



Henry Jones keeps a watchful eye on proceedings.





Building knowledge and confidence are what the days are all about.



A dog bringing a bird to hand, what more could you ask for?

**MP:** *Who are the training days aimed at and are there any prerequisites for attending?*

**ES:** The first two days we ran at Kedleston included long-term clients of mine and clients who'd never been on a shoot day before. We offered them 'spectator tickets' where novices would join the beating line without the dog so they could just experience the day, and other tickets where people could bring dogs. For those in the latter category, I made sure I'd seen those dogs on game because I'm not in it to ruin a day for a gamekeeper, who'd already have enough to

worry about running a day for complete novices. We then also made sure they were fully supported all the way through the day; each novice had a mentor who'd be working along them. Some of these were past clients of mine who've 'graduated' with their picking-up or beating dogs; others were people who had mentored me.

**MP:** *Walk us through your role during the day and how it's run*

**ES:** What we try to do is get all the novice beaters and pickers-up and their mentors to meet where the Guns meet on shoot day, purely

because I want the novices to hear the safety briefing, to watch the Guns draw pegs and get a better idea of what happens on a shoot day from the other side. I then thank the Guns for having us and address the novices, explaining what we'll be doing, the terminology they will hear on the day and what it means. After that, the novices meet and spend a little time getting to know their mentors before the first drive. The novice pickers-up go off with the Guns and the novice beaters go off with the gamekeeper. I then alternate between those two teams on each drive, providing guidance.

Mentors in the beating line are asked not to bring their own dogs but I always want picking-up mentors to have dogs to sweep up after a drive, pick runners and so on – it is really important to me that novice pickers-up know their etiquette on when and when not to send their dogs out, despatching birds, bracing their birds and so on.

Since few mentors knew the Kedleston ground very well, it meant that they really had to think about where they were putting the novices and why. This created great conversations between the two parties and the novices ended

up eagerly listening in when the mentor was asking the gamekeepers questions about how the drives were being run, where the Guns would be pegged, where they needed to stand and so on. Those questions were the same ones novices will need to ask when they are on a new shoot in seasons to come and get used to working things out for themselves.

**MP:** *Are you trying to maintain or improve standards in dog work on shoot days through your training days?*

**ES:** I'm trying to create good dog handlers in the picking-up and beating lines. From my point of

view, if I train someone's dog and it misbehaves on a shoot day, then that reflects badly on me. I want to send people to shoots who are ready. I just hope these days will benefit game shooting in general, and newcomers, whether they are beaters with dogs or pickers-up, have the knowledge behind them to help and not hinder a day. It's really hard for novices trying to gain access to shoots if the gamekeeper thinks they are going to be hard work and would rather they went to a gundog trainer before coming to them. Not all gamekeepers are like that, but if we can make more novices ready for shoot days it could change the naysayers' views slightly.

**MP:** *What definitely doesn't happen on one of your training days and what are the biggest takeaways you hope that attendees will leave with?*

**ES:** Clients won't get shouted at, told to leave or be left to fend for themselves. They are going to be mentored and guided all the way through. Some people think they know what to expect. A lot of novice handlers come to me and say, "Oh, I could never get into game shooting; it's so cliquey and I wasn't born into it", but that's not what they're going to get.

The biggest takeaway is the confidence that their dog is ready, because I wouldn't have put them in that situation had they not been. Also, the confidence to know that they can either come back to Kedleston or go out and find their own shoots. 🐾

For more information about the services offered by Cunningshot Dog Training, visit [cunningshotdogtraining.co.uk](http://cunningshotdogtraining.co.uk). For more on the Ladies Working Dog Group, visit [ladiesworkingdoggroup.com](http://ladiesworkingdoggroup.com). For more on Kedleston Estate Shoot, visit [kedlestonshoot.co.uk](http://kedlestonshoot.co.uk)